

New surgical procedure clears blocked arteries of plaque buildup

By Hillary Copsey

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When Oscar Archer retired six months ago, he tackled his honey-do list — and he's still working on it.

That list might not have been touched at all if Archer hadn't undergone a procedure last summer to remove an arterial blockage in his femoral artery.

Called orbital atherectomy and performed at some Treasure Coast hospitals with equipment known as the Diamondback, the procedure cleans out an artery blocked with calcified plaque. A drillbit pulverizes the hard plaque into pieces smaller than a red blood cell, allowing blood to flow freely again through the artery and relieving symptoms like Archer's.

"I could walk about a quarter of a mile, then my left calf became starved for oxygen and I'd have to stop. A quarter-mile was my limit," Archer said.

After the surgery, "I haven't found a limit yet," Archer said.

More than 12 million Americans are affected by the buildup of plaque in arteries, and most of those will experience pain like Archer's. The femoral artery, perhaps because of the way it runs between two active muscles, is prone to blockages, said Dr. Mario Sanguily, Archer's vascular surgeon who works with Martin Memorial Health Systems.

The blockages make walking and other activities painful, and if the plaque is hardened with calcium, a stent or angioplasty won't reopen the artery.

"These guys aren't in jeopardy of losing a leg," Sanguily said, "but their lifestyle has been hampered."

Doctors used to treat the problem with an arterial bypass — cutting out and replacing the affected section — a surgery Archer's two older brothers had years ago. While his brothers are as well and active as he is now, they have large scars compared with his small incision, had hospital stays instead of his outpatient procedure and spent a longer time recovering from their surgeries.

"Their time to recuperate was no comparison," said Archer, who was up and walking within days of the Diamondback procedure. "Mine was instant compared to what theirs was."

That's typical for most patients undergoing orbital atherectomy, said Dr. Rene Loyola,

who uses the Diamondback at St. Lucie Medical Center. Though the procedure is not inexpensive, the Diamondback is much less invasive for patients and leaves doctors more room to maneuver if a blockage returns.

"If it fails, I can always get a bypass," Loyola said.

For Archer, the Diamondback and some diet changes seem to have been enough to keep the plaque at bay.

Now, the retired defense contract administrator spends his days working in his yard, crossing things off his to-do list at his own pace.



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